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In Search of The Real Self: A Functional Perspective on Optimal Self-Esteem and Authenticity

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Who is the real me? Am I in touch with my inner feelings? Do I live my life in accordance with what is most important to me? These and similar questions about the authenticity of one's self are frequently heard in today's postmodern society (Baumeister, 1987; Brown, 1998; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1994). Although notions of an authentic self have been around for ages (Harbus, 2002), they became most fully articulated and popularized by humanistic psychologists in the 20th century (Maslow, 1968; Schneider, Bugenthal, & Pierson, 2001; Yalom, 1980). In spite of humanistic psychologists' enduring fascination with the authentic self, most empirically oriented psychologists were hardly concerned with issues relating to the self's authenticity. Conceivably, this neglect was due to the difficulties that are inherent in specifying which aspects of the self are authentic and which are not (Kuhl & Kazén, 1994). Moreover, questions about the self's authenticity seemed to go beyond the scope of the field's traditional self-report methodologies, given that individuals might defensively distort their answers or lack introspective access into the functioning of their authentic self. In view of these obstacles, the role of authenticity in the functioning of the self seemed destined to remain uncharted territory, in spite of its central importance in modern-humanistic conceptions of the self.

In more recent years, however, a number of researchers have found ways of rendering the authentic self open to empirical scrutiny (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kuhl & Kazén, 1994; Tesser, 1993). Although this work is still preliminary, sufficient findings have accumulated to conclude that the functioning of the authentic self can be systematically observed and studied through experimental means. Kernis's (this issue) analysis of optimal self-esteem is in close harmony with these recent experimental approaches to the authentic self. Specifically, Kernis proposes that optimal self-esteem follows from the secure feelings of self-worth that arise from the successful operation of the person's authentic self. Because Kernis identifies various ways of operationalizing secure self-esteem, his analysis offers researchers some attractive new tools in the study of the authentic self. Indeed, research using these tools has been able to verify that high self-esteem that is genuine, true, stable, and congruent with implicit self-esteem is linked to various indicators of authentic functioning, which include self-insight, unbiased processing, autonomous goal striving, and an open way of relating to others.

Overall, Kernis makes a convincing case that secure self-esteem is linked to the functioning of the authentic self in theoretically significant ways. Nevertheless, as one might expect for an underinvestigated topic such as this, there remain some important unanswered questions about the relation between self-esteem and authenticity. In particular, Kernis's analysis leaves unexplicated (a) how the various forms of secure

self-esteem are theoretically related to each other (see Kernis, this issue), (b) how secure self-esteem is linked to authenticity (again, see Kernis, this issue), and (c) why secure self-esteem should be optimal. In the following paragraphs, we attempt to show how a recent perspective, known as Personality Systems Interactions (PSI) theory (Kuhl, 2000, 2001), may contribute to the resolution of these issues.

On the Functional Basis of Secure Self-Esteem: The Importance of Affect Regulation

PSI theory is an integrative framework that seeks to explain human motivation and action control in terms of the underlying functional mechanisms (Kuhl, 2000, 2001). According to PSI theory, effective action control draws on the ability to regulate one's own feelings. For instance, in order to realize one's goals, it is often helpful to bring oneself in a good mood because positive feelings channel one's energy resources towards the implementation of one's action plans (Koole & van 't Spijker, 2000; Kuhl & Kazén, 1999; Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995). The ability to strategically control one's own feelings is referred to as affect regulation. In a recent application of PSI theory, Koole, Kuhl, and Sedikides (2002) proposed that self-esteem differences are closely connected with affect-regulation mechanisms. Much in line with this, Kernis (this issue) argues that "global self-esteem is best understood as an affective construct consisting of self-related emotions tied to worthiness, value, likeableness, and acceptance." Consequently, individual differences in self-esteem can be understood as more or less stable patterns or preferred styles of affect regulation. From this perspective, individuals with high self-esteem are characterized by the use of certain affect-regulation mechanisms that allow them to maintain positive (and few negative) feelings about themselves, even in the face of self-threatening situations.

How do high self-esteem individuals go about maintaining their good feelings about themselves? Relevant to this question, PSI theory distinguishes between a number of distinct forms of affect regulation, which are assumed to be mediated by qualitatively different psychological mechanisms (Kuhl, 2001). We concentrate here on *self-activation* as one important form of affect regulation that seems most relevant in the current context. PSI theory defines the *self* (or *extension memory*) as a system that consists of extended networks of cognitive-affective representations of autobiographical experiences, motives, and emotional preferences. According to PSI theory, activation of the self-system has a number of important regulatory functions, which include (a) *sensitivity*, or early attention to unexpected or self-threatening information; (b) *self-motivation*, or the ability to restore positive affect under frustrating or difficult conditions; (c) *self-relaxation*, or the ability to downregulate negative affect; and (d) *congruence orientation*, or attending to information that matches expectations and wishes. Because self-activation requires the activation of extended cognitive networks, it operates somewhat more slowly than affect-regulation mechanisms such as avoidance or denial. Even so, self-activation may be instigated within 200 ms after encountering the threatening experience (Rosahl, Tennigkeit, Kuhl, & Haschke, 1993), and it still operates largely on an implicit level (Koole & Pelham, 2003; Nowak, Vallacher, Tesser, & Borkowski, 2000; Rosahl et al.). The functional characteristics of self-activation are supported by a variety of recent empirical findings (Koole & Jostmann, 2002; Kuhl & Kazén, 1994; Rosahl et al.; see also Kuhl, 2000, 2001).

The four affect-regulation functions that are associated with self-activation seem to map on to the four forms of secure self-esteem that are distinguished by Kernis in the target article. The first, *genuine self-esteem*, can be derived from the sensitivity function, which involves paying attention to unpleasant truths about the self rather than denying them. The second form of secure self-esteem, *congruence* with implicit self-esteem, is characterized by the activation of implicit positive self-representations, especially when unpleasant experiences have to be integrated. This form of secure self-esteem can be related to the self-relaxation mechanism associated with the operation of the self system. Because such implicit self-representations are assumed to be mediated by extension memory (Koole & Jostmann, 2002; Kuhl, 2001), congruence may be classified as a form of secure self-esteem that is based on the activation of personal experiences that are able to recover a relaxed state of mind. This self-relaxation mechanism should not be equated with avoidance because congruence with positive sides of an experience is sought after, not before, becoming aware of an unpleasant experience. The third aspect of optimal self-esteem, *true high self-esteem*, is grounded in the person's self-regulated feelings of self-worth. As such, true high self-esteem is also likely to be mediated by self-motivation, that is, the ability to restore positive affect when confronted with difficult demands. Finally, *stable self-esteem*, the fourth component of optimal self-esteem can, be explained on the basis of the fourth mechanism associated with self-activation, namely congruence-oriented attention. Congruence-oriented attention can explain the stability of self-esteem because it selectively focuses on information that matches expectations derived from existing self-representations. At first glance, this congruence orientation may seem inconsistent with the sensitivity component presumably associated with self-activation. However, this contradiction is resolved when one

takes into account that these two opposing attention mechanisms occur in temporal succession. Indeed, recent EEG data indicate that self-activation is characterized by an early sensitivity to threatening information (within around 200 ms of encountering the threat), which is followed by the subsequent down-regulation of the threatening affect (around 600 ms after encountering the threat; Rosahl et al., 1993).

The foregoing implies that the different forms of secure self-esteem might be mediated by the various self-activation mechanisms that are described by PSI theory. According to PSI theory, self-activation is a highly adaptive form of coping with threat. In particular, self-activation contributes to the person's self-development by promoting the internalization of self-alien experiences (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In addition, self-activation is a durable way of down-regulating threat because self-activation permits the person to consolidate the threatening experience within the larger scheme of his or her autobiographical experiences (i.e., the self-system). However, regulating one's affects through self-activation is not without psychological costs. Specifically, self-activation requires that the self-system makes contact with the threatening experience (see the sensitivity component of the self mentioned earlier). This contact forces people to confront experiences that are perceived as unpleasant and self-threatening. These costs that are associated with self-activation motivate many people to rely on alternative affect-regulation mechanisms, such as *intuitive avoidance* (a focus on pleasant distractions and trivialization of the threatening experience; e.g., Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995), *sensitization-dissociation* (splitting off the threatening experience from the self; e.g., Showers, 1992), or *intentional suppression* (effortful attempts not to think about the threatening experience; e.g., Wegner, 1994). According to PSI theory, each of these alternative affect-regulation strategies is characterized by particular functional advantages and disadvantages (Kuhl, 2001). In particular, intuitive avoidance is quick and effortless, sensitization-dissociation helps to insulate the self from the threatening experience, and intentional suppression is under the person's conscious control. All three affect-regulation strategies, however, are likely to be less durable than self-activation because they leave the original source of the threatening experience intact.

By analyzing the regulatory mechanisms that may underlie the various forms of secure and insecure self-esteem, PSI theory may help to generate various new researchable hypotheses. First, it may be informative to examine whether the temporal pattern of early sensitivity for threatening information and subsequent congruence orientation is characteristic for the self-mediated forms of secure self-esteem (i.e., congruence, noncontingency, and stability). Second, self-mediated forms of affect regulation influence a wide range of cognitive and neurobiological responses, which include the activation of extended networks of associations (or extension memory, e.g., alternative meanings or action strategies; Bolte, 1999; Koole & Jostmann, 2002; Kuhl, Baumann, & Kazén, 1999); knowledge about one's own emotional preferences (Kuhl & Kazén, 1994); self-related knowledge (Koole & Jostmann, 2002); and increased hippocampal activity (Sapolsky, 1992; cf. Kuhl, 2000, 2001). It seems worthwhile to investigate whether the different forms of secure self-esteem are accompanied by these signatures of extension memory activation. Finally, future research may address intuitive avoidance, sensitization-dissociation, and intentional suppression as additional forms of affect regulation that play a role in establishing (in)secure self-esteem. Although these are only a few illustrative examples, it appears that the application of PSI theory could bring a fruitful new perspective to the study of secure self-esteem.

From Secure Self-Esteem to Authenticity

One of Kernis's central claims in the target article is that secure/optimal self-esteem is linked to the functioning of the authentic self. Unfortunately, Kernis refrains from elaborating on the precise nature of this link. In rather global terms, Kernis (this issue) states that "optimal self-esteem involves favorable feelings of self-worth that arise naturally from ... the operation of one's core, true, authentic self." From this passage, one might conclude that Kernis regards optimal self-esteem as merely an epiphenomenon that accompanies the operation of the authentic self. Yet the extensive discussion that Kernis devotes to optimal self-esteem seems to suggest that Kernis regards optimal self-esteem as much more than an accidental by-product of the authentic self.

How could secure or optimal self-esteem be related to the functioning of the authentic self? Although there may exist multiple valid answers to this question, I approach this question once more from the perspective of PSI theory (Kuhl, 2000, 2001). As noted before, it seems plausible that the various forms secure self-esteem can be interpreted in terms of particular strategies for affect regulation. As such, we may ask whether affect regulation has any implications for the functioning of the authentic self. The psychological significance of affect regulation is often understood in terms of hedonism (e.g., Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, 2001). According to a strict hedonistic account, people engage in affect-regulation efforts merely because entertaining positive feelings is more rewarding than entertaining negative feelings. More recently, however, theorists have begun to acknowledge that the psy-

chological significance of affect lies not only in its hedonic implications, but also in the influence that affect exerts on superordinate regulatory systems (Frederickson, 2001; Martin, Ward, Achee, & Wyer, 1993; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). In agreement with the latter line of thinking, PSI theory proposes that affect modulates the activation of various self-regulatory systems (Kuhl, 2000, 2001). Of particular relevance, PSI theory argues that the self-system (i.e., extension memory) is facilitated by down-regulation of negative affect and/or an enduring state of positive affect. Based on this modulatory role of affect, access to the self's motives, autobiographical knowledge, and extended networks of associations should be promoted by any situational or dispositional factors that assist in the down-regulation of negative affect and/or the maintenance of enduring positive affect. This prediction has received confirmation from multiple experimental findings (Baumann, Kuhl, & Kazén, in press; Frederickson, 2001; Koole & Jostmann, 2002; cf. Kuhl, 2001).

The modulatory influence of affect on self-access can be used to account for the link between secure self-esteem and authenticity that has been implied by Kernis. As argued above, secure self-esteem may act as an affect-regulating resource, which helps individuals to maintain positive affect and down-regulate negative affect over extended periods of time. According to PSI theory, this type of affect regulation should promote access to the self (i.e., extension memory), especially under stressful circumstances, which otherwise inhibit self-access (Baumann et al., in press; Koole & Jostmann, 2002; Kuhl & Kazén, 1994). Secure self-esteem may thus safeguard the person's cognitive access to the self and thereby foster authentic functioning. From this perspective, secure self-esteem is more than an epiphenomenon of the authentic self. Rather, secure self-esteem may act as a vital self-regulatory mechanism that helps individuals to stay in touch with their inner feelings and needs, particularly during stressful episodes.

Is Authenticity Always Optimal? Toward a Dynamic Conception of Optimal Functioning

The ultimate goal of Kernis's analysis is to lay out which kinds of self-esteem are conducive to optimal functioning (and which are not). Kernis seeks to achieve this ambitious goal by equating optimal functioning with authentic functioning. Departing from this logic, Kernis has been able to explicate some important functional characteristics of the authentic self (i.e., awareness, unbiased processing, action, and relational).

Even so, from the perspective of PSI theory, there is still an important element that is missing in Kernis's conception of optimal functioning. In functional terms, Kernis's conception of optimal functioning is mediated by the activation of the self-system (or "extension memory") and positive, intuitive goal strivings (or "intuitive behavior control").

In PSI theory, this mode of functioning is termed *self-maintenance* (or "self-regulation"; Kuhl, 2001). PSI theory regards self-maintenance as an indispensable aspect of optimal functioning. Nevertheless, a chronic fixation on self-maintenance is likely to lead to functional deficits. First, chronic activation of the self-system is likely to lead to an underdeveloped, undifferentiated self-system, due to a lack of inflow of new, self-alien experiences. Although perhaps counterintuitive, the importance of alienating experiences to self-development has been observed in a number of recent investigations. For instance, creative individuals often go through a phase of alienation or ruminative concern before producing a new work (see Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Schimel, 1999; Biebrich & Kuhl, in press; Rank, 1932/1989). In a related vein, the internalization of new tasks and experiences is typically accompanied by negative feelings, which predominate especially during the initial stages of the internalization process (Baumann et al., in press; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Harmon-Jones, 2000). Second, chronic activation of intuitive behavior control is likely to lead to impulsivity and the development of behavioral fixations because of a lack of self-discipline and planfulness (e.g., Gibbons, Eggleston, & Benthin, 1997). Accordingly, PSI theory argues that the importance of authenticity and positive, intuitive goal strivings can be overemphasized, given that optimal functioning sometimes requires active suppression of the authentic self and intuitive behavior. PSI theory terms the latter type of functioning *self-control*, defined as a volitional mode in which a central executive imposes one dominant goal on the system and suppresses opposing self-aspects, and in which the person's experience is focused on self-alien, that is, negative or unexpected, events (Fuhrmann & Kuhl, 1998).

Self-control and self-maintenance are functionally antagonistic, which means that these volitional modes mutually inhibit each other. Given that both self-control and self-maintenance are necessary to achieve optimal functioning, it follows that it is highly adaptive for people to be able to switch between the two volitional modes. As we argued in the previous section, affect regulation appears to be one important mechanism that permits flexible switching between volitional modes. On an experiential level, people become more sensitive to new, self-alien experiences when they experience negative affect (Baumann et al., in press; Deci & Ryan, 2000). When this negative affect becomes

subsequently down-regulated, these new experiences can become integrated into the self (especially when this down-regulation occurs through self-activation). On a behavioral level, people tend to interrupt their intuitive goal strivings and form complex action plans when their needs are frustrated. As soon as this frustration is lifted (i.e., when positive affect is restored), people can begin to implement their action plans (Koole & van 't Spijker, 2000; Kuhl & Kazén, 1999; Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995). Accordingly, people who are able to regulate their own affects are capable of switching flexibly between different self-regulatory functions. From the perspective of PSI theory, such switching is more crucial to optimal functioning than the chronic activation of any self-regulatory function in particular (even when this concerns the chronic activation of the authentic self).

Conclusion

Kernis offers a provocative analysis of secure self-esteem and how it may relate to the authentic self. In this commentary, we explained how PSI theory (Kuhl, 2000, 2001) might be used to complement and enrich this analysis. From the perspective of PSI theory, the functional mechanisms that underlie secure self-esteem serve as powerful affect-regulation instruments, which allow individuals to maintain access to the self, even in times of emotional distress. Secure self-esteem may thus support important aspects of the authentic self and optimal functioning. We hope that these reflections will prove useful in further elaborating and developing the framework that Kernis offers and to other researchers who are interested in secure self-esteem.

Notes

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Self-Esteem Challenges

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Kernis's target article eloquently summarizes the literature on self-esteem, introduces the construct of authenticity as a way to differentiate self-esteem profiles, and ventures to define optimal self-esteem. In this commentary, we raise issues about the need for parsimony in organization and measurement of the self-esteem construct as it stands in current literature. More importantly, we also advance a dynamic, process-oriented approach to the conceptualization of self-esteem, and as such, suggest that attention be given to the processes by which intrapersonal behaviors and interpersonal interactions enhance, maintain, or undermine self-esteem. Like Kernis, we underscore that the conceptualization of self-esteem requires discussion of what is healthy or optimal. We draw from organismic perspectives such as self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000), and eudaimonic conceptualizations of psychological well-being (PWB; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, in press; Ryff & Singer, 1998) to elaborate these points. Finally, we call for future work to examine the early antecedents and life course dynamics that influence the development, ongoing revision, and maintenance of self-esteem, and to address the clinical and social implications of self-esteem research.

Toward a Parsimonious Conception of Self-Esteem: Single Construct, Multiple Levels

From an organizational standpoint, the literature on self-esteem is complex. There are multiple labels for